**Vahni writes: The shortlisted writers expanded my horizons. In re-reading, even more than first reading, I was repeatedly taken out of myself, asking: Can language do this? Can imagination go there? How might the next poem, and the next, invite readers to be transformed? Each of these publications made me rethink what a book, or collection, of poetry can be. What scintillation or reverberation is desirable in shorter pieces versus a ‘through-composed’ work? Where do distinctions between ‘whole’ and ‘part’ collapse? How do changes in the way we experience life and process information, via new technologies and twenty-first century predicaments, mesh (or not) with older (dare one say ‘universal’, or least widespread and widely-understood) modes of appreciation and expression? And what does it mean to reward a second collection? These writers are ethical word-wizards whose already astonishing poetry I want to endorse because I believe in its process of becoming.**

It was a pleasure to discuss the Ledbury Forte Prize books with Tara Bergin. Our independently-made longlists overlapped. Even where they did not overlap, they resembled each other in that we each found a range of poetry exciting. This is reflected in the diversity of the shortlist, though we did not set out to create any kind of numerical balance – we simply discussed our responses and criteria honestly, including what our unconscious biases might be. I found myself glad to change my mind for the better, not only as regards my opinion of a few books, but in how my ear is attuned to certain styles of poetry. I only wish that even more small and independent publishing houses had entered. The existence of a prize like this speaks to the practical support that poets and their publishers and editors need for their words to make their way into a wider and more unpredictable world of potential readers. It was heartening to see that the visual and musical aspects of the page are being enjoyed by poets who could fall either side of ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ rather than being relegated to one or the other category: to see moving shapes, and to hear many voices, and sometimes an orchestration of sounds other than ‘voice’. It was interesting to observe where the language and reasoning of science was and was not deployed, and whether or how far an environmental awareness permeates what seems sometimes to be a nostalgic, politically quietistic, or by implication defensive appreciation of the natural or local. I did wonder at how many books set themselves an exercise to work through, ekphrastic or otherwise, and whether the second collection is especially given to visible or extra-poetic stabilization of its structure. However, it was inspiring to see how many of these ‘collections’ also work as books: parts and whole in gear. Themes of mutability and (self)-discovery counterpoised love and elegy. A sense of the ‘I’ as able to project itself imaginatively and empathetically into personæ and to switch through memories and places came across in collections that travelled between geographies, or states of being, without necessarily touching on the memoiristic or asserting the documentary. There was also a refreshing sense of the ‘it’: of the unknowability of what may be ‘outside’ (outside the stanza, the room, the body, the border, the mind, the language). Here is the poem as a curious space for revelation, tentatives, analysis, and marvel.

**Judy Brown, *Crowd Sensations* (Seren)**

The epigraphs to Judy Brown’s *Crown Sensations* are from Elias Canetti on *Crowds and Power,* and Marion Milner on the ‘effort’ and ‘dim fear’ involved in the painterly attempt to know the real edges of objects. There is nothing of the treatise about *Crowd Sensations*; but here is poetry as overanalysis, and all the more gorgeous for it. A dizzy amount is going on in every line; it is an understatement to say that the language is rich. When scale, or point of view, changes, this is not to say that the previous perceptions have slipped from focus: everything set in play stays in play, and each moment is dense with the other moments, so that these poems – none even as long as a page, but each as thick-feeling as an atlas – so much concludes or exhausts itself as it is set aside, still whirring in the middle of the blank. The reader can anchor themselves in what becomes known through recurrence as the ‘collection’ moves on: Hong Kong; Cumbria; trips to the market, to the dentist; firelighting; the curling strand of a love affair gone, or going, up in flames and smoke. Four *Songs from West Cumbria* are intercalated. These are numbered (1), (2), (5) and (7): *Crowd Sensations* is not totally accounted for, nor will it give everything away. Brown achieves and then strangely and masterfully travels well beyond what many ‘mainstream’ poets aim for. A technically clear, accomplished and accessibly-worded poem like ‘Unsafe Harbour’ tells the story of a woman’s breast cancer diagnosis in three six-line stanzas. What is extraordinary is how the metaphor of the body as geography is worked out: the woman’s hope that the tumour ‘would keep to its own kingdom, / an isolate city with sealed gates’ giving way to a generalized account that lifts our skin off and our self-awareness into another dimension of all the physiological and anatomical activity that, usually hardly known to us, makes ‘us’ up: ‘Neck, armpit, and groin – these are places / of grain and pulse – basin and channel where / ships pause to spill their cargoes, where hawsers / tear into their moorings. Here knowledge / is unloaded; things start to heat.’ The ‘inhuman lungfuls’ of a poem like ‘The Dehumidifier’ turn me cold to my toes in the best possible way; exact, yet it leaves me asking *what is this really about*.

**John Clegg, *Holy Toledo!* (Carcanet)**

The front flap presentsJohnClegg’s *Holy Toledo!* as ‘a history of English literary criticism in the twentieth century, a bestiary of the American southwest, an unreliable guide to the desert’. While cowboy/critic figures and their settings do indeed recur, it is possible to enjoy this wonderfully insane and formally virtuosic book for many other reasons. Certain poems are unnerving in their perfection of thought, form, image and sound. For example, ‘The Lasso’, crafted like intricate ropework which can release, or go wrong, at one pull, deploys repetition and taut focus to create and reflect on the ‘time to think’ in the moment of shock and mutilation as the ‘erratic firework’ of a thumb flies past. ‘Figtree’ draws the reader in to participate in a blind knot of eroticism, disquieting in its intensity; one finds oneself possessed, not voyeuristic, as Clegg’s syntax takes over the mind and hypnotizes it into imagined, shared movement. Clegg’s frame of reference includes Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Oxbridge espionage, country music (‘T is for Texas’) and so much more; but the reader does not have to know everything that the poems know in order to ‘get’ the poetry. The book is affable, bewildering company, like an impressive friend who will adapt and adapt again in order not to be too many steps ahead, but who inevitably runs faster, then reliably saunters back with news of an accident and/or a bag of sweets. These poems have a keen eye for the technicalities and oddities of everyday life that too often get ironed out of ‘poetic’ vocabulary and preoccupations; architects, expedition members in icy realms, lawn layers, and bystanders’ children speak as they do or might, from ‘katabatic’ to ‘kit’, ‘ramsonde’ to ‘scuzzy’. I especially enjoyed the presence of the scientist ‘A.’, not exactly a muse nor a love-interest, but a mover of precision and indexing in this work that marries the shaggy with the microscopic.

**Emma Hammond, *The Story of No* (Penned in the Margins)**

In *The Story of No*,Emma Hammond’s writing was absolutely thrilling on the first and each subsequent look. The title may seem to allude to the power of saying ‘No’ (claiming the power to say ‘Yes’ was a necessary but not sufficient step in, for example, second-wave feminism). Equally it acts as a gesture towards, perhaps a put-down of, the well-known, controversial, and influential text of dominance/submission sexual fantasies, *L’Histoire d’O* (*The Story of O*) by ‘Pauline Réage’ (Anne Desclos). However, the voice of this book is all its own. The dedication, ‘For Mum’, firmly inscribes it in what is becoming a women-writing-to-women tradition. However, unlike, say, the laconic/self-lacerating accounts of younger women faced with older women’s illness and death in Maggie Sullivan’s *The Argonauts*, Emma Hammond’s poetry of daughterly closeness and bereavement jitters, criticizes, rages and celebrates with the energy and something of the form of the too-much-invoked (but here rightly) Sylvia Plath. In ‘Expert’, the poem mourns: ‘ – how / are you disappeared? My Magpie, / bright paradox, expert of experts, / all conjuror of love – absent Yes.’ This is reminiscent of Plath’s poem for her infant son, ‘Nick and the Candlestick’; but Hammond’s persona is a grown-up child crafting verse for a parent who is gone. This generational reversal, and the emphasis on filial connexion, takes the work of poetry into important, still not-enough-written terrain. Capitalization, italics, other variations in formatting, an ‘I’ and ‘we’ that slide, coded conversations about the embarrassing ‘BUNNIES’ that are sanitary towels, lists of everything from the changing condition of the actor Renée Zellweger’s looks to Fabergé eggs to the discarded items (‘jellyfish hat’, telegrams) that make up the deceased mother’s ‘life in a bin’, convey the mess and noise, grime and glamour, of a distinctly young and urban life. There is strength as well as dark humour in how the terrifying violence and disposable identities which are hurled at young women via social media and under late capitalist heteropatriarchy find themselves re-mixed and represented in snippets, reduced to absurdity. If love does win, it sings a ‘Duke of complex steps’.

**John McCullough, *Spacecraft* (Penned in the Margns)**

The poetics of space offered by the four sections of John McCullough’s *Spacecraft* are far from abstract. These poems combine accessible emotion with a humane and linguistic intelligence. They reward an enduring relationship with a reader who will read them again and again. What struck me most on a first reading was the personal dimension of the sequence on the death of a lover from an AIDS-related illness. On a second reading, what stood out was the way this work tenderly and directly addresses a variety of people and objects. In ‘Flittermouse’, the long-fingered, dictionary-reading beloved turns into the word for ‘bat’: squealing, he skips town and skitters out of the text. ‘Flittermouse, / what happened?’ the poem asks. ‘Flother’ attempts to revive an old world for ‘snowflake’. The delight in finding ways to refer to snowflakes is not academic, but personal. Once again, the poem yields to talking *to*, not about,its subject. It is as if the snowflake is crystallized and put back into the sky with a loving promise: ‘Little star, the ground is open like a book / to catch you.’ ‘The Marina Village’ begins ‘Barometer, little oracle – which way is up today?’ Notably, this poetry lives where ‘havoc meets a wall’; at any moment, within the controlled chaos of these formal shapes, suicide and storms are as near as sex or syrup. Each poem displays a kind of exiled magician’s skill, existing in the survival of extremity and the doling out of extremes. I love the reticence with which the Old English letter *þ* governs a poem in which a thicket of *th*- sounds leads to the apparition ‘with bark for skin, bracken fingers’ that, not one but many’, whispers the word ‘*Thief*’ to the poet – yet the name of the Old English letter, ‘thorn’, is held back for the endnotes. John McCullough is a haunting writer of hidden sharpness and soft, deliberate flaps and gaps, between elegy set in columns, between wordform and idea.

**Sandeep Parmar, *Eidolon* (Shearsman)**

Sandeep Parmar’s *Eidolon* is extraordinary in its combination of intimacy and sweep. We know – we think we know – Helen of Troy, of the face that launched a thousand ships and the beauty not matched by virtue. Even if we do not know her legend, we know – or are – women, people, who are spoken for, spoken about, told on; but not necessarily listened to. This is Helen’s book; and ours. We are in stories or have stories stuck to us (like burning material to skin; like fragments from normalized, high-tech surveillance applied to official accounts of our lives). We crave comfort, perhaps, from our storytellers – but we exist, all too often, in a condition of narrative dissatisfaction. Like these untitled, numbered poems, we shift and thin out and rematerialize. There is a sharp, strange pleasure in the dashes, quotation marks, italics, blanks and gaps of *Eidolon*: visible vacancy always subject to being over-vividly overwritten, whispered into. These pages *feel like* the condition of being out of control of what our life ‘means’, and yet also like living it, to the hilt. *Eidolon*’s appended essay mentions the ‘formation of discourse around citizenship, national identity, surveillance, consumption, the wizardry of global finance, the din of distant wars.’ Even without this explanation, the din and discourse make themselves evident in the poetry. This is not to say the book is ‘academic’, or loud. In fact, a poem inspired by the plight of Chelsea Manning (Bradley Manning) never names her, but figures her only through the prophet Tiresias. A reader who wants to *relate to* a human element will find buses and cafés, crop dusters and children, cricket-loving uncles and astrologically-minded lovers. Rankine-like tensions and sympathies in conversations at checkout counters are recorded. But when a car rolls into Los Angeles, there too is a boat arriving into Troy; oatmeal cookies are urged on customers by an r-rolling voice in the same space where a copy of the New York Times reports on the spy agency the NSA; mothers may be ‘terrible and unpredictable as the sea’, but the city lights up ‘like a motherboard on high alert’. There is a barely controlled, skittering frenzy of indignation and observation, which comes through in the images and sudden vignettes. A lesser poet, more self-consciously a poet of our age of war, might have issued rigid indulgences, pieties about what is unsayable. Parmar, with the blitheness of brilliant anger, does not dwell descriptively on, for example, the horror of our chemical warfare, but deploys it in a simile, explosively subservient to language, with the simplicity of the ancient epic poets whose words are weaponed: ‘Delos like hot white phosphorus’. This is a collection unlike any other. It is restless, it is terribly recognizable, and it refuses to seduce.

**Sam Riviere, *Kim Kardashian’s Marriage* (Faber)**

Sam Riviere’s satirical, sometimes wistful, focused, yet seemingly scattered, tour de force takes as its structuring device the seventy-two days of the celebrity Kim Kardashian’s marriage. It features an epigraph from Kardashian herself: ‘I want that forever love’. The seventy-two, sometimes ultra-short, quasi-lyrics are grouped into eight sections: ‘Primer’, ‘Contour’, ‘Highlight’, ‘Powder’, ‘Blend’, ‘Shadow’, ‘Liner’, and ‘Gloss’. Overtly these borrow from the vocabulary of make-up. Such words, removed from their glossy-journalism, YouTube-tutorial, or shop-display context, and placed with blank space around them, regain strange resonance and depth. ‘Contour’: what ascents and declines are being mapped? ‘Highlight’: is that an order? ‘Powder’: what’s the battle, and who is keeping their powder dry? As for ‘Blend’ and ‘Shadow’: this poet is a spider in the house of interwebs. Kardashian is an up-to-date version of the null love-object projected, idealized, and overwritten in so much western masculinist courtly poetry of the last thousand-odd years. Picking her as a supposed focus allows the stylized, inbuilt dysfunctionality of poet-object relations to glitter. This book critiques more than the immediate moment. Individual fragments may layer Job, job, believer, and dust; invoke a ‘Noam Chomsky error’; or aim ominously at *getting it all*. They drop us from their narrowness into a surprisingly deep sense of our easy greeds and unequally distributed mortality under ‘globalization’. Others bubble with irreverence and are pure pleasure in the mouth. This is less a collection of submittable, single pieces, than a multifaceted yet entire book. Reading the whole thing feels more to me like being alive today than a good many beautiful and accomplished, tear-off-any-leaf-and-it-will-do-as-a-keepsake ‘collections’ do. Riviere’s book does not describe, but enacts, the neat madness of *how any day goes*: how it feelsto have a tiny spring of love, or a job to do, and to leave on a journey towards the beloved, or the appointment, after Googling one’s destination and being assailed by online ads, the leakage from other people’s headsets, and the endlessness of bleeps, clicks, billboards, slogans, logos, or even just distant mechanical infrasound – all the time striving to hold to an image of temporary journey’s-end, to a thread of time-limited purpose, to glued-together eggshell self as a goal. However much Sam Riviere plays with the idea of surface and superficiality, he and his seventy-two are too clever not to have, and sometimes lose, heart.